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ABSTRACT

This paper suggests an approach to communication skills which views these skills, in first and second language acquisition, as related, integrated "language-experiences." Three examples of language-experience situations are presented, the first dealing with native language acquisition, and the other two with second language learning. Thirty-two suggestions are given for implementing this technique, including the following: (1) begin with meaningful student activity; (2) start with the known and move gradually toward the unknown; (3) utilize many and varied experiences; (4) make the experience as concrete and participatory as possible; (5) keep it relevant and interesting; (6) precede written expression with oral expression and do not isolate communication skills by mode; and (7) provide models if the learner is unable to create language for a given experience. Disadvantages to this method include: (1) it is time-consuming; (2) it lacks structure and vocabulary control; and (3) it requires leaving the classroom. Advantages include: (1) it is a form of individualized instruction; (2) it is very interesting to students; (3) it is easily integrated with other curricular subjects and cultural elements; and (4) it provides valuable information about the child's ability to produce language. (AM)

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THE LANGUAGE-EXPERIENCE APPROACH AS A MEANS TO READING PROFICIENCY AND LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY IN FIRST AND SECOND LANGUAGES

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(In some senses this paper does not fit with the major topic of the conference; in other ways it is perhaps as relevant, if not more relevant, than most. Many papers have concentrated on various parts of the communication processes; this paper suggests that a viable alternative is to approach the communicative skills of first and/or second languages as related, integrated, language-experiences.)

How can a "language-experience approach" be utilized to promote reading proficiency and language proficiency in first and second language learning situations? For purposes of this paper, all language related cognitive and affective behaviors or activities--including (at least) listening, speaking, reading and writing, will hereafter be referred to as language arts or communication skills. If this designation is troublesome, as it was to one of my psycholinguistics mentors, please try expecially hard to overcome your frustrations and facilitate the communication process by "listening" beyond the definitions. Much of the terminology will please neither the linguists nor the educators in this audience.

This paper contains a very brief description of the language-experience approach to communication skills, three examples of such an approach being utilized, more than thirty practical suggestions for implementing the approach and a brief summary of the advantages and disadvantages of the approach.

What Is The "Language-Experience Approach"?

Not everyone would agree to any given definition because many uses and variations have been developed by those utilizing some aspect of this approach. This is not a source of embarrassment, for such questions as "What is linguistics?" or What is a linguistic approach to reading or spelling?" are equally debatable.

Russell Stauffer states that:

> ...When the hyphen is placed between language and experience, it creates an all-embracing concept of human communication: not language and experience, but "language-experience." The human use of language (concepts), from infancy through old age, is based on experience (percepts) and cognition) and on man's need to communicate. The functional dynamism of "language-experience" makes it a sweeping concept.[1]
>
> The practices and procedures of the Language-Experience Approach can be as influential in general, and in the teaching of reading and writing in particular, as mathematics and symbolic logic are in the world of the scientist.[2]

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Sylvia Ashton-Warner in Teacher suggests that an "organic approach is not new.

> The Egyptian hieroglyphics were one-word sentences. Helen Keller's first word, "water," was a one-word book. Tolstoy found his way to it in his peasant school, while, out in the field of UNESCO today, it is used automatically as the only reasonable way of introducing reading to primitive people: in a famine area the teachers wouldn't think of beginning with any words other than "crop," "soil," "hunger," "manure," and the like.

"Not that organic reading is exclusively necessary to the illiterate of a primitive race. True, it is indispensable in conducting a young child from one culture to another...."[3]

Ruth Strickland summarizes the procedure nicely by stating:

> Every child brings to school a language. He can listen and he can talk. The language approach to reading begins with this language and utilizes it as the material for reading. Children are encouraged to draw and paint pictures and talk about their in-school and out-of-school interests. In the case of a picture, the teacher writes under the picture the child's story of it. If he says, "This is my Dad. He is washing the car," that is what the teacher writes for him. Stories and accounts may be composed and dictated by an individual, a group, or the whole class. The children are placed so that they can watch the teacher write. She calls attention to what she is doing. "I have to start here with a big capital letter, don't I? We'll put a mark like this at the end of a sentence. Now what else shall we say? Can anyone help me spell the word? Here it is, up here." Should a child say, "My sister saw some, too," or "My mother made me a doll dress," The teacher might say, "Listen to the sound of those words - sister, saw, some. They all start with the same sound, don't they, so I'll have to start all of them with the same letter, s." Or, "Do you hear the m sound in all of those first words, 'My mother made me.' I'll have to start all of them with the letter m because they all start with the m sound."[4]

"As children become aware of words, the letters that compose them in written form, and symbol-sound correspondences, they are ready to try the reading of beginning books which may or may not be reading textbooks. A language approach to reading takes children logically from the known, spoken language, to the unknown, reading and writing. Reading and writing are taught together as two faces of the same coin."[5]

How Might One Use A Language-Experience Approach When Teaching Communication Skills to First or Second Language Learners?

Following are three similar, yet different, examples of language-experience situations.

Example I: Native Language Learning

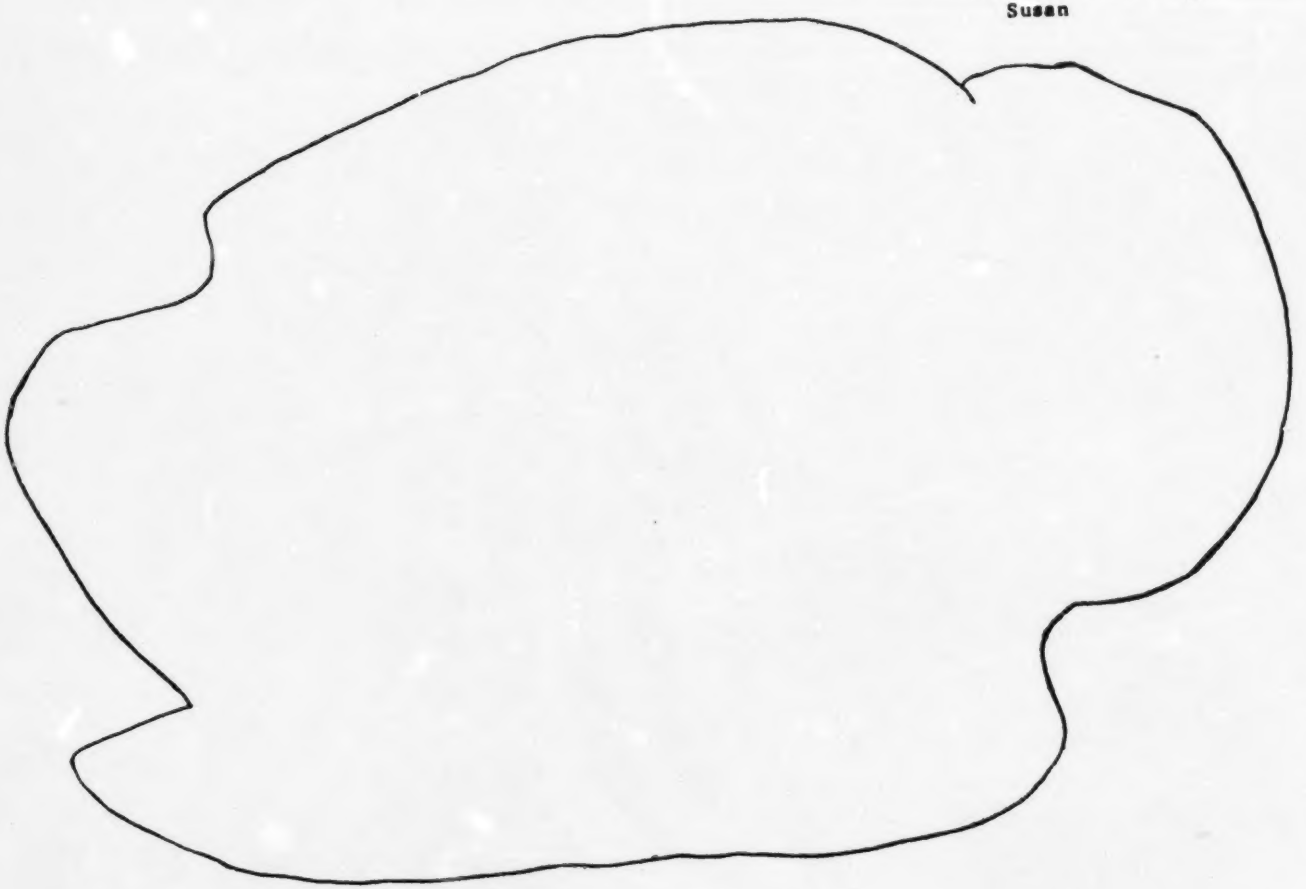
THE EXPERIENCE was a short (about 15 minutes) family airplane ride. It was the first time the two children had ridden in an airplane. The plane was a four-seat, single-engine aircraft which compactly held: Mother, Daddy, Mark, Susan and the pilot. The family had driven to the airport to see some navy reconnaissance aircraft which were on display. The decision to "take a ride" was spur of the moment. Later that day (after kindergarten), the children and Daddy returned to the airport with a polaroid camera and photographed the airplane. Discussion naturally occurred during the activity in the air, afterward, as well as at the postsession picture taking. After the evening meal, Susan and Daddy went into the study. Susan dictated; Daddy typed. After the experience-story was typed, Susan "read" it to Daddy. A language-drawing session evolved with both Daddy and Susan drawing pictures and discussing the pictures drawn with each other. Spacial relationships and details related to size, shape and perspective were probed. Labeling the pictures was a joint project involving Daddy and Susan talking about picture content, spelling and letter formations; Susan did some of the handwriting. Before going to bed that evening, Susan "read" the story and "shared" the pictures with Mother and Mark.

ABOUT RIDING ON THE AIRPLANE* (Example I story)

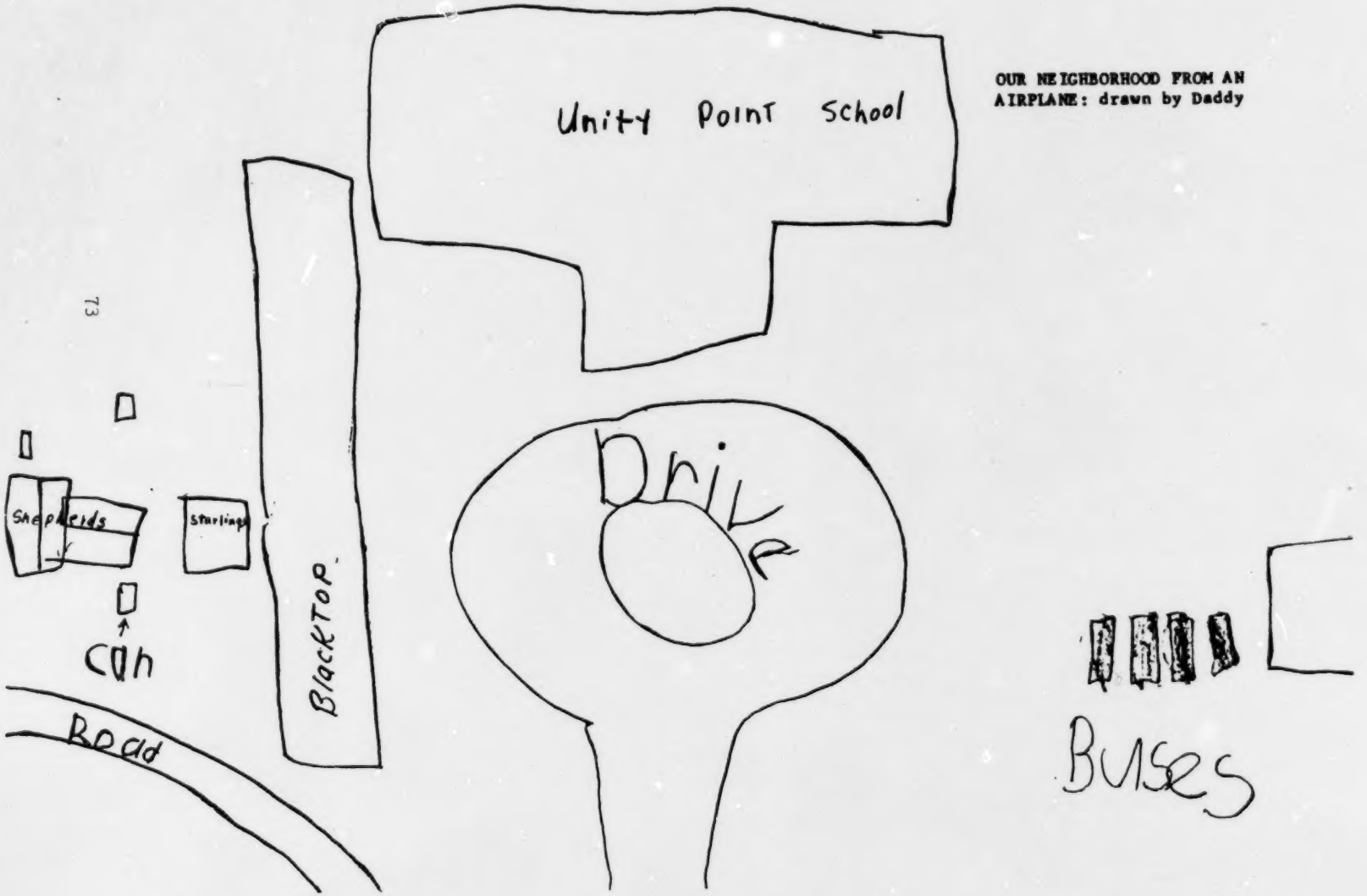
On Thursday,March 24th, we rode on an airplane.
I had fun.
The airplane was red and white and blue.
There were five people on the airplane: the pilot,
Mommy, Daddy, Mark and Susan.
The airplane sounded like a motorcycle.
The propeller went real, real, real fast. I could hardly see it.
I saw my own house. I saw Unity Point School. They looked
like toys because I was way up high in the airplane.
At first I thought it was going to be scary but when it got
going I got used to it.
I sat in the front seat beside the pilot; I was sitting on my
daddy's lap.
I saw Evergreen Terrace Lake, Campus Lake and the football stadium.
We saw the mall.
I saw Winkler School.
I saw the Unity Point school buses; they looked bright orangish-yellow.
I liked to watch the pilot. He winked at me.
We went inside two big airplanes. There were lots of control
buttons on the airplanes. (It looked like there was hundreds
of them)
I liked to watch other planes land and go up.
I'd like to ride on a plane again sometime. My stomach felt funny.
When we landed there was a big bump.
--told to Daddy by Susan March 24, 1977 (7:00 P.M.)*

*title and signature line added when the story was typed onto a spirit master and "mass produced", March 28, 1977.[6]

-drawn and labeled by
Susan

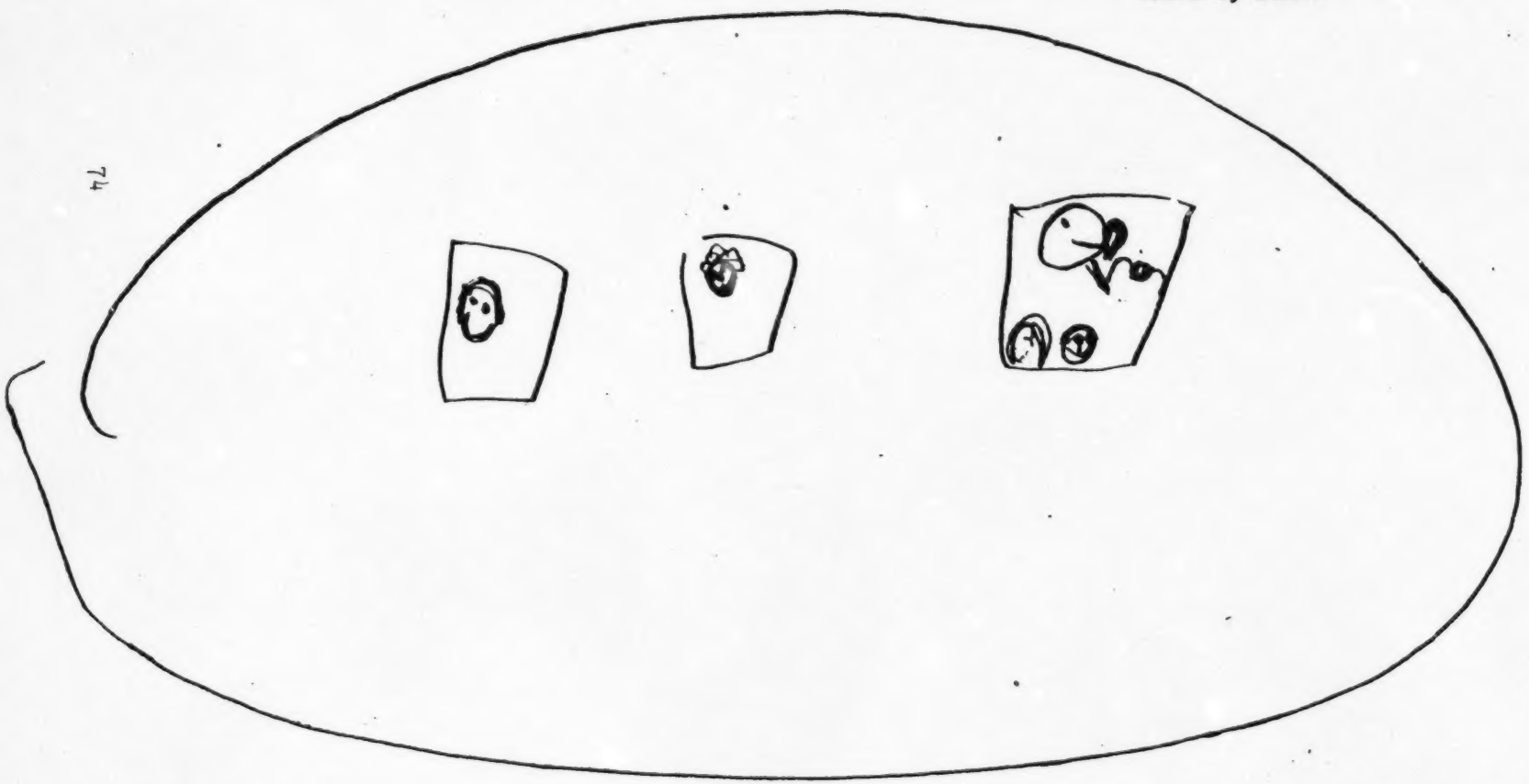


Evergreen Terrace Lake.



OUR NEIGHBORHOOD FROM AN AIRPLANE: drawn by Daddy

MY FAMILY INSIDE THE AIRPLANE:
drawn by Susan



Was this a language-experience?

Was it: speaking? listening? reading? writing?

Were tangential items of mechanics, such as spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and format involved?

Was it: personal? important to Susan? fun?

Was the content comprehendable by Susan? (i.e., Does she have the information base needed to understand what was written?)

Was the situation linguistically appropriate for Susan in terms of vocabulary used, word order and style?

Is it conceivable that Susan learned something about the relationship between oral and written language?

Did Susan have an opportunity to experience both oral and written symbolic encoding and decoding of ideas?

Did Susan "experience authorship" even though she barely touched pencil to paper?

Did this activity promote a positive attitude by the child toward reading and writing? I believe emphatically, YES!!! COULD YOU SAY THE SAME FOR ANY CONCEIVABLE COMMERCIALLY PRODUCED TEXTBOOK (reader, anthology or content text)? What about the vocabulary, is it common 1st grade vocabulary?

As a preschool activity for promoting communication skill development and refinement for a first language learner, the language experience activities are unparalleled in suitability. Such experiences generate high interest and motivation. They are linguistically appropriate because they utilize only the specific personal resources of the learner.

Examples II and III: Non-Native Language Learning

The implications for native speakers seem obvious. Applications to bilingual and/or second language learning may or may not seem so obvious or so practical. Many of the techniques can be employed. Consider this hypothetical example of a teacher who is trying to help six intermediate grade pupils (Vietnamese refugees) learn English. The children are taken to a grocery store (which is across the street from the school). The purpose of the trip is to purchase apples which will be eaten later as a snack. The teacher might pick up an apple and say "Apple..."This is an apple"..."I'm putting the apple in the bag." The teacher then takes the apple out of the bag and gives it to one of the students, saying "Apple..."You put the apple in the bag"...etc. Depending on the quality of the responses, the teacher determines the number of repetitions needed and decides on the scope of the encounter for each learner at the initial and subsequent experience sessions. The instructor would urge the learners to vocalize the happenings and work for eventual transfer of such things as vocabulary, sentence structures, pronominalization, etc. While at the store (scene of the experience) or upon returning to the conventional classroom, the teacher should record (on chart paper, ditto, etc.) as much of the experience in writing as possible. (A tape recording of a native speaker reading the account would be a very helpful learning aid to have for student use.) For a follow-up activity, the group with teacher help, could draw and label pictures of the experience (going, while there and returning) or reinact, through dramatic techniques, the experience.

(This would give much experience in paralanguage aspects such as: pitch, stress and juncture, as well as kinesics.)[7] If the situation is one in which bilingualism is being promoted, then both languages should be utilized during and after the experience. Perhaps the experience could be written first in the native language and the second language "equivalent" written directly under the first so that comparisons could be made. (In a similar situation, Caryl Adams,[8] a volunteer working with a non-English speaking child, helped the child fix instant Jello pudding for a treat. The language experience revolved around reading and following the directions on the box.)

Another much less dramatic example is one used by Emily Carr,[9] a bilingual SIU-C graduate student, working as an intern with non-English speaking children in a local public school. She found that she had considerable success with some of the children when she had them relate information concerning themselves, their family members, where they were living now and where they had lived in Venezuela. These were coupled with pictures drawn by the children. The stories were used for "content" as she worked with the pupils to help them learn English. Mrs. Carr began with "fill in the blank" kinds of activities where the information was about self.

My name is _____.
I am _____years old.
I have_____hair.
I have _____eyes.

Later, after drawing a picture of his family, one pupil dictated information concerning the members of his family. On a still later date, this pupil was encouraged to draw a picture of his United States home, his Venezuelan home and his school in Caracas. Such sentences as these were generated.

"Venezuaela is my count(r)y
I miss my bike
I miss my friend Miguel
My flag is, yellow, blue and red"

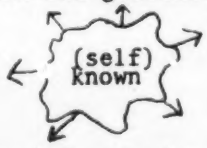
Although not an ornate[10] composition, this work represents information of real relevance and importance to this eight year old; a learner is seldom able to identify strongly with most of the commercially produced materials. Mrs. Carr tried to utilize relevant content in both the oral and written modes; she utilized both English and Spanish and attempted to constantly build on the ever increasing core of newly attained English language-experiences and at the same time develop new skills and flexibility for the pupils as they maintained and grew in facility with their native languages.[11]

The examples suggested above include quite a range. One is a family situation and involves a rather unique, dramatic first experience (an airplane ride); another involves students in a common experience outside the school building (purchasing a snack); the third experience is a learner simply sharing personal information about himself, his family and his previous experiences. There must be appropriate times for <u>all</u> such experiences as one teaches. Perhaps, to you, all of the above are common experiences for people learning to read and write in a first or second language. (They were never a part of this author's experiences in first or second language learning attempts.)

Suggestions For Implementation

The examples given provide a baseline for basic types of language-experience activities. Some of the suggestions which follow are "standard" language-experience procedures, some are personal adaptations which have been used by this author, and some are speculative projections of some of the principles. Some are practical with second language learning - some need modifications for such; some are practical with larger groups - some presuppose time for small group or individualization of instructional activity. As teachers you must use your imagination and modify many, any or all of them!

1. Begin with activity; pupil activity that is meaningful.
2. Begin with the known and gradually ooze toward the unknown.[12]



3. Utilize many and varied experiences. Rather than an airplane ride or an apple buying episode, what might the experience have been? Of course, it could have been any thing experienced real or vicariously; individually or in a group; recently or long ago; in the teacher-scribe's presence or without the teacher-scribe being present; related to other subject areas being studied or isolated information; contrived, set up by the teacher or occurring naturally or accidentally.
4. Make the experience as concrete[13] and as participatory by the learners as possible. In this author's opinion, the actual experience of purchasing an apple, riding in an airplane, talking about self and family or doing anything is an important part of the experience. Granted, a real apple brought to the classroom by the teacher would be better than nothing, in fact, the pictures drawn by the Venezuelan child added much to that example; a photograph would also have been helpful. A movie or video tape of someone shopping for an apple or taking a plane ride would help; a plastic or wax model of an apple would probably be better than a picture of an apple...which would be better than nothing. HOWEVER, the total experience is superior to any subpart. The less language facility the learner has and/or the younger the pupil, the more helpful the "concrete," total participatory, experience. Personal involvement is an important (and time consuming) part of the experience. Let the natural egocentrism of the learner work for you! The teacher's putting a ball on a box while saying and writing "The ball is on the box," is not the same as having the learners put the ball on a box while saying and/or writing "The ball is on the box." Having one member of the class place a penny in a small cup and then put the cup beside the box is not the same as having each learner participate in this spacial, ordinal language-experience. Having the teacher say the words, spell the words, handwrite the

words is not the same as personal experience. Let the learners do it; the teacher already knows how to do it!

5. Keep the created experience relevant and interesting. While in Carbondale, Illinois, recently, H. Alan Robinson said,

   "Children of today are not satisfied with 'it will help you in the future.' They should be dealing with things that are of use to them today. That is one reason why a language-experience type of approach is very useful when you begin reading instruction whether it be at the age of five or 50 or 80 because you can then deal with the kinds of things that are of relevance today FOR THEM."[14]

6. Precede written expression with oral expression; do not isolate the communication skills by mode.
7. Provide models if the learner is unable to create language for a given experience.
8. If you need to model, keep the language models simple.
9. If models must be used, begin to strategically vary the models early so that flexibility will be promoted from the beginning.
10. Be a scribe for beginners so that the task does not become too boring because of the mechanics of writing (handwriting, spelling, format, punctuation, capitalization). This also helps provide the learner with a quality product which may serve as a model later on when more independence is sought.
11. Take dictation from at least one learner per day. Even if you have 30 students, in a 180 day school year each will have dictated 6 stories (if needed). That is better than zero!
12. Use the learners exact vocabulary, sentence structure, word order, etc. initially. As performance improves, suggestions for usage refinement may be made IF and WHEN the learner is confident enough in his/her ability to appreciate the constructive suggestions.
13. As you function as a scribe, explain what you are doing as you "print" the story. (Say, "I am putting a period here so that people will know that this is the end of one of your sentences.")
14. Record stories in good manuscript style letters or perhaps use a typewriter with primary type. This is exceedingly important with very young children since their visual ability to fixate/ and sweep, as needed for the reading process, is often only grossly developed (if developed at all).
15. Move from being the chief scribe to having the child recopy short passages. Be careful not to violate the distance/plane principles of visual-motor abilities. (Young children often cannot copy materials that involve changing planes over long distances, i.e., the child may not be able to copy onto paper on a horizontal plane, his desk, what he sees on a vertical plane, the chalkboard. This is especially likely if the distance is great, the symbols novel and/or the student's visual functioning impaired.)
16. Just as soon as the child has the rudiments of the mechanics of writing, let him write about the experiences with you giving all the needed assistance. (Don't send him/her to a

dictionary or rule book - help the learner immediately; develop support skills at another time.)

17. Don't make learners write after every experience; vary the follow-up with such things as:
    - dramatics activities,
    - drawing pictures and labeling them,
    - audio recording of experiences,
    - pair compositions,
    - mass compositions and/or
    - teacher compositions.
18. As some students develop facility in writing, let them take dictation from some who are less skillful.
19. Utilize various formats for follow-up writings such as:
    - a letter to Grandma, a girl friend or pen pal;
    - a postcard to a friend;
    - a bumper sticker;
    - a poster;
    - a newspaper account (front page type or editorial type);
    - an informal account;
    - a fictitious account,
    - a poetic account and/or
    - an artistic account.[15]
20. Employ logs[16] with all students who are minimally literate. It's been done with children as young as seven and as old as 60; it's been done with students learning a second language. Logs are journals (diaries) where each pupil is encouraged to daily write questions, comments, suggestions, experiences in a personal booklet. The teacher reads the comments and writes comments back before returning the log the next day. THE LOGS ARE FOR COMMUNICATION AND ARE NEVER GRADED.
21. Take photographs (polaroid when appropriate) so that you have something to provide a cue for relating to the experience at a later time. (These are excellent for developing past tense.)
22. Produce and display pictures of the experiences. They may be teacher drawn, pupil drawn and/or class drawn (murals). When appropriate use them to provide the motivation for language expression from the learners. When appropriate label them.
23. Use pupil stories for many things. One day it is an experience record, another day it is used for:
    - spelling,
    - handwriting,
    - punctuation,
    - capitalization,
    - content organization,
    - style (register) flexibility,
    - usage refinement and/or
    - development of proofreading skills.
24. Mass produce some pupil products and distribute them to classmates, parents, etc. (One class even created and sold a newspaper.)

25. Create a library of pupil compositions; this is especially helpful if you are teaching a content unit. Keep the materials from year to year and you have some custom-made resources.
26. Create word banks. They may be individual and/or class collections.[17]
27. Use word bank contents for creating charts that reflect relationships:
    synonyms,
    antonyms,
    homonyms,
    heteronyms,
    acronyms,
    palindromes,
    "new" words,
    begin alike words,
    end alike words,
    spelling patterns,
    rhyming words,
    suffixes,
    prefixes and
    semantic similarities (names of body parts, names of birds, names of family members, building names, jobs, etc.)
28. Make available books, magazines, pamphlets, etc., containing content similar to the learner compositions.
29. Read to the learners every day. Read something that one of the students has created and read something that a professional writer or you have created.
30. Strive to keep the link between reading and writing apparent.
31. Strive to keep the link between oral and written language apparent.
32. When teaching the learner to read using the learner's own compositions, follow basically the procedure below:
    a. Let the learner read the material produced in context until they are comfortable with it.
    b. Begin to have them underline or point to specific words within the story. (Example: "Point to, 'pilot.'" "Underline, 'propeller.'")
    c. On small strips of cardboard about half an inch wide (and long enough to hold one word) copy the words from the story. As the pupil learns the word, he keeps it and stores it in his word bank.
    d. Strive to develop recognition of the words by sight (in isolation).
    e. Encourage the learners to use the word strips to create sentence completion or "cloze" type games to play with each other. (Example: An airplane's propeller turns real, real, real _____.)
    f. After the learner has mastered several words, the teacher should arrange the words into new sentences. Eventually new syntactical and semantical possibilities should be introduced. All this is done within the vocabulary that is part of the word bank of the learner.

g. If the learner expresses a need for a word that is not in his word bank, provide it for him/her.
h. As the "a-g" basics are being developed, one should continue to provide experiences for new stories. The experiences should be directed so that appropriate content will be covered and therefore, appropriate stories will be composed and used.
i. Some teachers may be concerned with skills instruction and may want to have small group or whole class seminars to facilitate development of specific skills or tasks such as: phoneme-grapheme correspondence (phonics), pronunciation, punctuation, capitalization, format, spelling generalization (of which there are very few which are worthwhile in the English language), dictionary skills and any other items of mechanical, grammatical and/or comprehensional importance. Teacher developed materials based on groups experiences are most desirable.
j. The teacher constantly attempts to move the learner from self toward others. It is appropriate and helpful to begin reading with self-materials; however, the process does not end there as one moves on then to attempt to comprehend what others have written.

Books could be written about some of these individual suggestions. Many are footnoted so that future reference might be made if desirable. The writer chose to suggest many things briefly in the hope of making this practical to more people rather than pontificating on a few items and perhaps not providing any new ideas to anyone. Take these rudimentary suggestions and see what you can do with them!

Disadvantages and Advantages

By now many of you will already have your list of advantages and disadvantages. Briefly, without justification, they would be summarized by this writer as follows.

Disadvantages

There are problems with the language-experience approach because:

1. Teachers do not believe enough in themselves and are so afraid of standardized testing that they will not take the responsibility upon themselves for creating a language-experience related curriculum for their pupils.
2. It is time-consuming especially during the initial stages.
3. It is somewhat unstructured.
4. There is no vocabulary control (except usage by the learner and the experiences created).
5. Transition must be made so the learner can function in the linguistic framework of others.
6. One needs to leave the classroom (to have experiences outside the school building) to fully utilize this technique.

Advantages

The language-experience approach:

1. Meets individual needs in terms of content and language.

2. Is highly integrated with other communicative processes; the relationships are obvious and meaningful.
3. Proceeds from known to unknown with the learner as the center of the process rather than a book or curriculum guide.
4. Is flexible in that it begins with the information known by the learner and also utilizes the learner's linguistic system.
5. Promotes high interest.
6. Success is quick and personal; most young children are very ego-centered and this is used to good advantage.
7. Extends beyond the classroom to real life.
8. Can be easily integrated with other curricular subjects and activities; it is ideal for sharing aspects of culture other than language.
9. Provides the teacher with information about the child's ability to produce language; this then provides the basis for development and expansion of the child's communcation skills.
10. I'm prejudiced. I've seen it work with children when everything else failed. One such child was my own--you'd laud it too if you were me!

Footnotes

[1]Russell Stauffer. The Language-Experience Approach to the Teaching of Reading. (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 3.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Sylvia Ashton-Warner. Teacher. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963), pp. 27-28.

[4]Ruth Strickland. The Language Arts in the Elementary School. (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath and Co., 1969), pp. 266-67.

[5]Ibid., p. 268.

[6]Please realize that this is not Susan's first such experience story. She has been dictating notes, letters and invitations to various friends and family members (in the household and outside the household) since she was approximately two. Typing the story with small type violates size and space factors for a young child and should not be done under normal circumstances.

[7]John W. Stewig. Exploring Language With Children. (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co., 1974), pp. 155-91.

[8]Caryl Adams in Conference with T. Shepherd, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Ill., 1977.

[9]Emily Carr, Unpublished Practicum Conferences and Reports with T. Shepherd, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Ill., Sept.-Dec. 1975.

[10]Terry R. Shepherd. "Self-Concept and Self-Evaluation, Writing: Strands and Strategies for Describing, Prescribing and Evaluating the Task," Resources in Education, August 1976, ED120761, pp. 1-15.

[11]K. J. Swick and T. R. Shepherd. "Program Objectives for Bilingual, Multicultural Populations." Reading Improvement, XII (Spring 1975), p. 14.

[12]Marjorie S. Johnson. "Basic Considerations in Corrective Instruction." Corrective Reading in the Classroom: Perspectives in Reading, VII (1966), pp. 64-65.

[13]Ibid.

[14]H. Alan Robinson, "Teaching Reading in the Content Areas: Is There Anything Else?", Speech at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Ill., March 3, 1977.

[15]Shepherd, pp. 1-15.

[16]Terry R. Shepherd. "Logs for Communication." Elementary English, XLV (December 1968), pp. 1080-82.

[17]Mary Anne Hall. Teaching Reading As a Language Experience. (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co., 1976), pp. 60-66.